

APPENDIX E

Talking Book Library

Users Focus Groups and Interviews

Two focus group sessions were held with Talking Book Library (TBL) users: one in Billings, the other in Helena. A total of twenty people participated. Eight additional TBL users who were unable to attend the focus group sessions were interviewed via telephone.

Focus Group Discussions

Focus group participants were asked where they first learned about the Library of Congress talking book program or the Montana TBL. A number of participants indicated that they started using services in another state; however all of these individuals said that they had no difficulty making the connection with the Montana program when they moved to Montana. Focus group participants indicated that they had learned about the TBL from physicians, people at the School for the Blind, friends, the Veterans' Administration, the Montana Association of the Blind, the Great Falls Association of the Blind, Montana State Blind and Low-Vision Services, Lions Clubs, Pioneers, and from a friend at the local public library.

Most focus group participants thought the medical profession could do a better job of informing people about talking books. They thought doctors should especially stress the fact that you don't have to be totally blind to use the TBL service. Focus group attendees also said that friends and acquaintances who see the machines are curious and interested in what the machines do. This was seen as an opportunity to share information about the program.

Those attending focus groups felt that the service needs to be promoted more in senior news bulletins and on the World Wide Web through sites offering information related to individuals with disabilities. They felt that this was especially important in Montana since it is so large geographically and sparsely populated. However, they pointed out that promotions done in written form (on paper) aren't much use to the visually impaired. Web-based information was seen as useful to sighted individuals who work with the visually impaired and to individuals with physical and visual impairments who have adaptive devices that help them use computers.

The focus group participants offered several reasons why some folks don't use the talking book service. Some were relating their own experiences prior to becoming users of the service. They said that some people who are eligible choose not to use the service because they don't accept that they have a visual limitation. Others think that because it's free, it's charity, and they don't want that. They expressed the opinion that there need to be people willing to talk about the fact that losing your vision doesn't mean the end of the world!

What users like most about the service overall is the quality of the narrators/readers (those whose voices are easiest to understand), the superb staff in Helena, and the remote access to talking book catalogs on the web. They like that TBL encourages reading and the enjoyment of books and that there are “home grown” books (books of Montana authors) in addition to those recorded by the National Library Service (NLS). They’re also pleased that mailing is free and that someone takes care of servicing the playing machines and of keeping them in good working order. It’s also satisfying that the various agencies involved in serving people with vision disabilities seem to be talking to each other. Several users noted that they appreciate that the talking books are not abridged.

Most of the dislikes or complaints shared regarding talking book services were directly connected to the larger national program. Users wish the equipment were smaller, that there were more materials recorded, especially more serious works (or a different genre than seems to be recorded, such as more westerns than romances).

Some participants wished that the talking book format would move to CDs rather than tape cassettes that are currently in use. (NLS is in the process of evaluating various digital formats for the next generation of talking books.) One person noted that there are really two separate populations being served, one of younger, computer literate people who want to access books and information electronically, and one of older people who may be put off by the new technologies and are comfortable with the technologies as they are.

Participants in the focus groups talked about other services that are offered through the Talking Book Library as well as about potential service improvements or enhancements. Several people mentioned the availability of descriptive videos, especially of older movies and expressed their appreciation for this service. Most who had tried the descriptive videos indicated a desire for additional titles.

Some participants wondered if commercial books on tape that are available from rental sources such as the Cracker Barrel Restaurant chain could be supplied through the Talking Book Library. Other mentioned improved access to large print books that some people can use and can get from some public libraries. One person wondered if there was an international interlibrary loan service that would get recorded materials for them from other countries. Participants in both sessions wanted current “great stuff” to be recorded more quickly. Some had used talking book services in other states or were knowledgeable about newer adaptive technology devices and shared those experiences with their group.

Focus group attendees were asked about their use of other library resources such as those provided by local public libraries. Only a few participants indicated that they use other library services such as interlibrary loan, university libraries, large print materials from their public library, Braille materials from Salt Lake City, and materials from Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic. However, it should be noted that those who do use other services use a wide variety of services.

Focus group attendees were asked if they had any complaints about talking book service. There were some complaints about tapes that continue to be circulated from Helena that are seem to be defective or worn. Some people said that they thought the quality of the tape used for recording had declined. Others attributed muffled sound quality and tape jamming to equipment that they felt was sub-standard. A few people spoke about a particular series of machines that had been recalled and replaced and expressed the opinion that replacement machines were not as good as the earlier model. Some users complained that they get too many books through the automatic selection process and have been unable to communicate to the TBL to reduce the number they get.

Other suggestions made by focus group participants included providing more web-based information by scanning documents, such as newsletters, so that they could be accessed electronically, and finding readers for more college texts. There were several requests for additional titles to be recorded.

Montana users think the program works well and that the system for selecting and recording Montana books is well developed and effective. One participants said, “The biggest comment I have is ‘muchas gracias!’”

Interviews

Eight TBL users were interviewed via telephone. While many of their comments echoed those made by focus group participants, there were also a few new perspectives and ideas. Like the focus group participants, some of the interviewees had been referred to the Montana TBL from talking book libraries in other states; another had used the service in another state and appears not to have been referred specifically, but said she had no trouble in finding the Montana program when she arrived.

Of the eight persons interviewed, one was an avid computer user and had JAWS software. He said ordering books via the web was a good idea, but that he’d miss talking to the people at TBL, even though they occasionally transpose numbers and send him the wrong books.

Several mentioned having used descriptive videos. One said her only complaint about the videos was that she could get only one at a time, but another said the videos weren’t really suitable because he had a hearing loss too. Yet another had trouble “following the videos.” Several thought the machines weren’t being repaired as well as they used to be; another thought perhaps NLS was using cheaper (and lower quality) tapes than before. As with the focus group participants, those interviewed enjoyed the Montana books that are recorded by volunteers and wanted to be able to get good popular books faster. Suggestions for subject areas that needed more recordings included scripts of popular movies, lyrics, musicals, books on music, literary criticism, and philosophy.